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7 December 2009

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Dear Mrs Roberts

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 30 November and 1 December 2009 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how well students are becoming effective learners in RE.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with students and teachers, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good with some outstanding features.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Results in 2009, for the majority of students who took the full course as their core RE programme on the basis of one period of RE each week, were above the national average for equivalent provision and represented good achievement. Results for the additional optional full course GCSE were above the national average and represented outstanding achievement by those students. A key strength of the students' work is

their ability to use argument to produce informed debate about a range of moral, social and philosophical issues. The students taking the optional course are able to offer a well-developed understanding of a range of religious perspectives on those issues, although this dimension of RE is slightly less well-developed in the students taking the core RE programme.

- The standards attained by the end of Key Stage 3 are generally above the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. Students develop a good understanding of the role and importance of religion and belief and are able to offer sensible opinions about a range of subject-related issues. In one Year 9 lesson, for example, students offered some very thoughtful personal responses to the issue of whether the presence of suffering in the world challenges belief in the existence of God. Progress at Key Stage 3 in RE is good, although the arrangements for assessing students do not provide very reliable data about their performance.
- RE makes an outstanding contribution to students' personal development. Their attitude to learning in RE is generally very positive and students value the opportunities to discuss and debate contemporary issues which they find relevant. The subject makes a very positive contribution to the development of broader personal learning and thinking skills. It also promotes the students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development very effectively.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is good with a number of outstanding features.

- All lessons in RE are planned and organised well. Relationships with students are positive. In the very best lessons, practice is outstanding and rooted in excellent subject expertise. Highly focused and well-paced teaching secures a high level of student involvement in learning. A wide variety of imaginative tasks and resources is used to extend thinking. The purpose and direction of the learning are carefully explained and students are actively encouraged to reflect on their work. Very effective use is made of group work and questioning to ensure all students are able to make good progress. Expectations are high and students willingly rise to the challenges set. Occasionally, where the focus of the learning is lost, activities do not always sustain students' interest as effectively.
- At Key Stage 4, careful teaching ensures that a skilful balance is maintained between giving students a clear understanding of the requirements of the examination while securing good opportunities for them to debate and discuss the issues which form the heart of the RE syllabus.
- Work is marked frequently and in detail. The best practice is outstanding and a dialogue is set up with the students about their ideas. In GCSE classes, careful reference is made to the examination criteria and students are given a very clear understanding of their progress and how to improve. At Key Stage 3, assessment arrangements are less effective and

limited use is made of levelling to help students understand the progress they are making.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- All students, in Key Stage 4, benefit from the opportunity to follow a full course GCSE in RE. This is delivered on the basis of one period each week. The course makes a very positive contributing to students' learning.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is broad and balanced. It reflects and goes beyond the expectations set out in the locally agreed syllabus. A strong emphasis is placed on students developing their skills of enquiry into religion and belief. The department recognises that the pattern of work across the key stage needs to be reviewed to ensure it incorporates a stronger pattern of continuity and progression into students' learning. At present, while there is much good practice, this is not embedded across all the units in the scheme of work.
- RE contributes strongly to the promotion of literacy and the delivery of citizenship. It also draws effectively on the school's specialist arts college status by providing a range of opportunities for students to use their creative skills in responding to their learning. While there is some use of external speakers to enrich students' learning in RE, the links with religious and belief communities in the local area are limited. Greater provision would extend the good contribution the subject makes to the promotion of community cohesion.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management is good with some outstanding features.

- RE benefits from very good leadership which has transformed the subject in recent years. Despite some difficulties in the past with staffing, RE has been established as a popular and high-profile subject in the school. It has received strong support from the senior leadership team. Staffing arrangements have now been stabilised and this is relieving some of the pressure on the RE director. The capacity for further improvement is good.
- Arrangements for monitoring and reviewing RE are also good. Effective use is made of examination data to evaluate performance. Although accurate information about student achievement at Key Stage 3 is much less secure, the subject leader knows the key priorities for improvement and has incorporated these within the subject development plan.
- The subject is resourced well, although access to artefacts is limited. The main RE room provides a stimulating and exciting environment for learning but not all students benefit from this as many lessons are taught in non-specialist accommodation.

- The subject has taken good advantage of the opportunities within the school for professional training. Involvement in the off-timetable programme of cross-curricular days has provided scope for developing and sharing good practice. The subject has found it more difficult to access effective subject-specific training and recognises that the most recent staff appointment would benefit from some additional help with developing subject knowledge.

How well students are becoming effective learners in RE

RE makes a very good contribution to the development of students as effective learners. Strong emphasis is placed on developing a range of learning skills including the ability to discuss and debate complex social, moral and religious issues. Personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS) are integrated well into the work of the department and students are routinely asked to reflect on the nature of their learning. Students speak positively about the benefit of RE in terms of extending their ability to organise their thinking and write discursively. Occasionally, the focus on PLTS can be slightly mechanical and detached from the main focus of learning in the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- extending the use of levels in planning the curriculum and assessing student performance at Key Stage 3 to secure more consistent progression in learning
- providing more opportunities for professional development to extend best practice across the RE team
- developing further opportunities to use fieldwork and visitors to enrich students' understanding of religious diversity in the wider local community.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector